

Paul's Letter to the Romans:



THE PINNACLE OF
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Think...Not Puffed Up but Humbly...

Romans 12:3-8

I am reading this morning from Romans chapter 12, verses 3-8. I invite you to open your Bibles there and follow along.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:3**...For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. ⁴ Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. ⁷ If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; ⁸ if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

It seems to me that two terrible things happened in the fall. First, man fell in his relationship to God and second society became hopelessly fractured. Man fell; society became fractured.

Here's what I mean by that.

In the fall, man became alienated from God. He ceased to be the proper reflection

of God he was intended to be. He ceased to reflect God's wisdom and moral goodness and became instead a dimly veiled, distorted caricature of God. Now that doesn't mean that man didn't remain smart or capable. Man, even fallen man, is extraordinary. Because he was made in the image of God, man remained, even after the fall, the most remarkable single part of creation. But he was only a shadow of what he had been before. Man's intelligence became perverted and irrational. Instead, of rightly reflecting God's glory and wisdom and living in a manner that properly honored God, man became self-obsessed and prideful and confused in his thinking. And Romans 1 tells us that he began to worship all sorts of things: birds and animals and creeping things and even he images of those things until he at last came to worship himself.

Of course, this self-worship and prideful self-adulation resulted in a society or community that was inherently fractured. You don't have to look very far into the biblical record to see what happened to culture or community after the fall.¹ Think about how long after Adam's sin, it took the first family to get into trouble.

Not only did the family break down but community, as a whole, broke down as well. The first family disintegrated and ceased to be a community that cared for itself but instead became radically individualistic and turned to murder. The first murder was brother against brother and every murder since has been a copycat killing.

Man fell in his relationship to God and community became increasingly fractured. Man fell as individuals and community became increasingly fractured. Genesis 6 reads like this and it is terribly tragic.

^{NIV} **Genesis 6:5**...The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.

But here's the thing, God determined in His wisdom to fix both things. He determined to resolve man's individual enmity with God by sending Christ into the world to redeem individuals from the penalty and power of sin through Christ's atoning work on the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, He purchased from every tongue, tribe and nation men and women for Himself, reconciling them to God and covering them over with His perfect, imputed righteousness so that they are no longer God's enemies but His own dear beloved children. Isn't that wonderful? He did that for each of us as individuals.

Then after Christ's ascension into heaven, God sent His blessed Holy Spirit into the world to gather those individuals redeemed by Christ's atoning work into a community that could extend to the uttermost reaches of the world and demonstrate to a world that knows nothing but fractured community what real community ought to look like.

Do you see what I mean?

Fallen individuals are redeemed to God through the atoning work of Christ and a fractured community is redeemed through the work and presence of the church. Individuals are redeemed by Christ and community is restored through the church.

Now listen to me...you are the Body of Christ. You are the members of the church from Christ's physical presence in the world. And you know, I saw that

last week in spades. For those of you who do not know, a little over a week ago, my wife's mother died. She went into the hospital with a sudden illness the day after my wife found out she had breast cancer. And you were so kind and sympathetic and generous. My wife received cards, hundreds of cards and we received meals and flowers, phone calls and prayers. It was such a remarkable thing and it showed something of what a genuine community ought to look like. And then one day last week after the funeral, the ladies of the church set up a meal after the funeral for my wife's family, just to show their affection, just to minister to her, and my wife's family was overwhelmed by your kindness and a few people asked me, **"Why are they doing that?"** and as I tried to think about how to answer that question it occurred to me that you are the body of Christ, looking beyond yourselves to the needs of others and you have done that time and time again. It is just an extraordinary thing to see a community work together and it doesn't have anything to do with commonality. I mean, we are about as diverse as we can be. It is not an issue of race...we don't care about that. We don't care about gender. We don't care if you are a Republican or a Democrat...honestly, we don't. What we care about is that Christ has redeemed you. He has drawn you to Himself and we need you to be a part of us to make that happen. That's the truth.

And indeed, that is the point Paul is making in Romans 12. Isn't it really? Look at chapter 12, verse one and two.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:1**...Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.

You see the command is to the group...to the community of faith. We are not just to offer our bodies individually...no, the command is to the whole community. The "you" in both verses one and two is plural, It's **"y'all offer your bodies as living sacrifices"** and **"y'all quit conforming to this present evil age"** and **"y'all be transformed by the renewing of you mind"** and then **"y'all will be able to test and approve what God's will is"**.

It's plural. Every verb there is plural not singular. We have to do this thing...this act of not being conformed but being transformed...together. We can't do it alone. If we try to do it individually, we won't accomplish very much. But if we make up our mind to do this thing together...to stop being conformed to this present evil age but to be transformed through the renewing of our mind...something remarkable will happen.

Now, I know that the commands there have to be lived out individually but it is telling, I think, that we are pretty much unable to even to consider how such commands might be worked out in community. As modern Christians, rather as American Christians, we tend to be only able to think in terms of the individual. But, Paul doesn't know anything about that kind of Christianity. He only knows about the kind of Christianity that is lived out in community. You for Paul, for the New Testament, there is no such thing as individual or private Christianity. Christianity is not a private or personal issue. It is an issue of community. Oh, we do have to be saved as individuals. We must come to a personal faith in Christ and we must embrace the gospel individually but we cannot live in isolation...we cannot live apart from community...we cannot grow apart from community.

Now the sad thing is, that is a hard lesson for Christians to learn. Even when we come to Christ as individuals and are redeemed by His blood we often cling to the way of the world and the thinking of the world...a way of thinking that is ruggedly individualistic. That is why Paul reminds us and tells us, **“Do not be conformed to this present evil age. But be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”**

You see the world loves itself and it worships at its own altar. And what Paul wants us to do as the community of God’s chosen and holy people is to think differently...to think rightly...to think godwardly. He wants us to stop being so puffed up and to think sober mindedly...to not to be conformed to the ways of the world but instead to think rationally, rightly, sober-mindedly.

Now, if I were to ask you, **“What is the biggest single thing getting in our way?”**

I think it is pride. I think because we are so in tune with the world, because we are so allured by its ways...because we are so conformed to it, we tend to bring its actions and its attitudes into the community of faith with us and the funny thing is...it is so much easier to see in others than it is in ourselves.

Take for example this story from Chuck Swindoll’s *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*.

Not far from Lincoln, Kansas, stands a strange group of gravestones. A *man* named Davis, a farmer and self-made man, had them erected. He began as a lowly hired hand and by sheer determination and frugality he managed to amass a considerable fortune in his lifetime. In the process,

however, the farmer did not make many friends. Nor was he close to his wife's family, since they thought she had married beneath her dignity. Embittered, he vowed never to leave his in-laws a thin dime.

When his wife died, Davis erected an elaborate statue in her memory. He hired a sculptor to design a monument, which showed both her and him at opposite ends of a love seat. He was so pleased with the result that he commissioned another statue—this time of himself, kneeling at her grave, placing a wreath on it. That impressed him so greatly that he planned a third monument, this time of his wife kneeling at *his* future gravesite, depositing a wreath. He had the sculptor add a pair of wings on her back, since she was no longer alive, giving her the appearance of an angel. One idea led to another until he'd spent no less than a quarter million dollars on the monuments to himself and his wife!

Whenever someone from the town would suggest he might be interested in a community project (a hospital, a park and swimming pool for the children, a municipal building, etc.), the old miser would frown, set his jaw, and shout back, **"What's this town ever done for me? I don't owe this town nothin'!"**

After using up all his resources on stone statues and selfish pursuits, John Davis died at 92 a grim-faced resident of the poorhouse. But the monuments...it's strange...each one is slowly sinking into the Kansas soil, fast becoming victims of time, vandalism, and neglect. *They were* monuments of spite, *sad* reminders of a self-centered unsympathetic life. There is a certain poetic justice in the fact that within a few years, they will all be gone.²

Now you know when I read that I thought to myself, "You know we really do the same kind of thing." Don't we do the same thing when we get mad because what we did was not properly recognized or properly appreciated? That is why in Romans 12:3-8, Paul starts off by reminding the Romans to get it right...to not be puffed up. If you want to know how not to be conformed to this present evil age and how to have your mind transformed by renewal...if you want to know how to be transformed...here's what you have to do. You stop thinking so highly

of yourself. You see the biggest single obstacle to stop being conformed to this present evil age and to being transformed by the renewing of your mind is getting over yourself. That is what Paul is going to say, plain and simple. Look at Romans 12:3 and as you do that let's begin to work our way slowly through these verses. Paul starts off...

^{NIV} **Romans 12:3**...For by the grace given me I say to every one of you...

Now let me ask you, **"What does Paul mean when he says that?"** What is he talking about when he talks about the grace **"given to him?"** What grace was given to Paul? What did he do for Christ? What was his job?

He was made the apostle to the Gentiles. You see when Paul uses the word "grace" here...he is talking about the kindness given to him or the gift given to him or the kind or gracious gift given to him. That is, he is talking about having been made the Apostle to the Gentiles. He talks about it in several places.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:7**...I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

^{NIV} **Galatians 2:9**...James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 3:10**...By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds.

Now I want you to think about that. Was Paul consumed with his position? Perhaps, I should ask it this way, **"Did the grace or office that Paul held make him a prideful man?"** Was he arrogant? Was he puffed up?

I don't think it did at all. Here's how Paul viewed himself.

^{NIV} **1 Timothy 1:15**...Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst.

And here's the reason Paul thought he was the chief of sinners.

^{NIV} **1 Timothy 1:13**...Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

You see Paul said, **"I was the worst of sinners because I persecuted God's people but God redeemed from that. I thought the community was rubbish. I persecuted God's people and God redeemed me. He called me to Himself and now I see the body of Christ for what it is. So even though I am the least of the apostles, but these gifts were given to me and I am going to use them. I am going to go at it."**

You see that is his point. That is what he is saying here.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:3**...For by the grace given me (as the apostle to the Gentiles...with all of the stuff I bring with me...with all of this long ago pride that God has so graciously rubbed away and with the deep abiding sense of humility that God has given me) I say to every one of you...Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...

The other night I was bringing my wife home from the hospital. We didn't get out until 5:30 pm. Her surgery started at 9:30 am...lasted until 1:00 pm and then she was in recovery until 3:00 and then in a holding area until 5:30 pm. Anyway, because it was a day surgery, they wanted us to leave so they could all go home and so we did...just in time to get into the worst rain storm in the history of North Texas. It was the night it rained 13 inches in Lancaster.

Anyway, we left Zale-Lipsky got on Interstate 30 and drove about from here to that door back there and stopped and sat and sat and sat for an hour. Then over the course of the next hour we made it to Irving and once there we sat for another hour. Then the drive from Irving to Arlington took another 30 minutes. A trip that normally took about 20 minutes took two and a half hours.

In the course of that trip, Beverly was drifting in and out of consciousness. She was drugged up pretty good but she was still not very comfortable and then she began to get terribly nauseous. Right before we got to Irving, she threw up on herself and the rain was falling down in torrents and we were stuck in traffic and unable to move and unable to get off the highway and I looked at my wife and saw how uncomfortable she was...how miserable she was and it made me quite angry. I prayed for God to hurry the traffic up. I prayed for God to let us get off the highway. I prayed to God to do something...anything...for me and for her and I began to think to myself, **“You know God, I deserve better than this. And even if I don’t, she does.”**

And you know what, God answered my thought by letting us sit and sit and sit. He answered me with a stony silence and this is what I think His silence said, **“You know that pride that you have...that pride that is so deeply ingrained in you...that pride that keeps you from ministering effectively to my sheep...that pride that keeps you from effectively understanding the mind of Christ...that pride that keeps you from getting across God’s kindness has got to go. All I am doing is wearing it away a little bit. Do you think what you are suffering right now is any worse than what my Son endured? It’s not even comparable. Tomorrow will be O.K. for you.”**

And of course it was. And then I began to prepare for this lesson and I opened up the Bible and read the verse for today and it said, **“By the way, don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought...”**

And the Greek there is so strange. Paul uses the word for **“think”** four times in a row in one verse. The Greek is so strange and the English doesn’t really get the repetition across very well. It’s something like, **“Don’t over think about yourself as it is proper to think...but think with sober thinking instead.”**

He uses the word **“think”** four times.

“Don’t over think about yourself as it is proper to think...but think with sober thinking instead.”

Do you know what his point is? Get it right. Evaluate yourself properly. Don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought but don’t think less than you ought to either. Just think rightly. Think rationally. Think soberly. And the word for **“soberly”** there is the same word used in Luke to describe the Gadarene demoniac. You know the guy that came running naked down the hillside, screaming at Jesus begging Jesus not to torture him before the time. It is used of him after Jesus healed him when it says he was **“sitting there dressed and in his right mind”**.

^{NIV} **Luke 8:35**...and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.

Here's Paul's point. It is not necessary for you to think that way. Don't think like that. Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought but think of yourself rationally, sober-mindedly, rightly. I love the way David Brown puts it.

Paul's play on words is well brought out by David Brown: 'not to be high-minded above what he ought to be minded, but so to be minded as to be sober-minded.'³

Now the reason you ought to do that, of course, is because you are the body of Christ. You are part of the community. If you belong to Christ, if you are trusting in Him, you are a part of the community that shows the world what true community is. You are precious to God. But you have a role to play and if you don't play it you are thinking of yourself more highly than you ought.

That's his point and it really is the simplest point in the world. Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought but think rightly and rationally and do that because you are the body of Christ. And of course that is his point in verse four.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:4**...Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

You have a role to play. You have to play it. You have a gift from God Almighty. If you don't use it, we are the worse off for it. Each of you have a gift and each of you are under obligation to use it. Individually, you are loved of God but you have a corporate responsibility because you together are the body of Christ. If you don't do that...if you don't find out what your gift is and step up and exercise it...we will not stop being conformed to the image of this present evil age. We won't have our minds renewed as they might be. Instead we will just limp along unable to be what we ought to be.

Each of us has a gift and we each have to use our gift for the benefit of the body at large.

Now my gift is not your gift. Your gift is not my gift. Isn't that the point he makes in 1 Corinthians when he says:

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 12:4...**There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

And isn't that the point he makes here in verse 6 when he says:

^{NIV} **Romans 12:6...**We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

Of course, someone is going to ask, **"How do I find out my gift?"** I'll tell you but not now. It's not important for me to tell how to find your gift right now. What's important for me to tell you right now is that you have one and if you don't think of yourself rightly you won't recognize it or you may mistake what it is or you may try to do something other than what you ought and the body of Christ will be sort of malformed, limping along unable to do all that it ought to be able to do or unable to fulfill all the duties it ought.

Last week, these dear ladies, One Plus, just stepped and made a meal for my wife's dear family and served it and were kind and generous and were so sweet and you know what they weren't preaching.

When Beverly's family came in Beth didn't say, **"Oh by the way would you open your Bibles over to Corinthians 13 because I have a few things I want to say as you go through the line."** No, she didn't do that at all. Instead, she said, **"What do you want to eat?"**

She took her role was and stepped and fulfilled it and when she did people saw the love of Christ...people saw the body at work. It's just the simplest thing in the world. And we have to do that. That's Paul's point here.

Don't think more highly of your self than you ought to. Instead think rightly...think rationally...think sober-mindedly about your part in the body of Christ. Figure out what you ought to be doing and do it. Oh I know some of you are confused about how to know what your gift is and we'll talk about that later but I suspect that some of you already know what you ought you to be doing. The question is, **"Are you thinking sober-mindedly so that you are doing it?"**

Look at what he says in the rest of the verses. It's so simple.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:6**...We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

Now do you remember how he started off the section?

^{NIV} **Romans 12:3**...For by the grace given me I am asking you to do this and this...

Now he finishes up by saying, **“We all have different gifts. We all have this wonderful grace that has been given to us and here’s the thing...we have to use the gifts we have been given. We have to step and do what we are supposed to do and we can’t be puffed up...inflated with ourselves. Rather we have to think about how we fit into the body and how we can fulfill our role and how the body of Christ can be transformed by our doing what we ought to do.”**

And then in the rest of the verses starting with the end of verse six, he just lists seven different things that people may be called to do and he encourages them to just go ahead and do what they are gifted to do. I don’t think he is zeroing in on the ultimate seven gifts or anything like that. I think he is just using the items in his list as illustrations. Look at what he says.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:6**...If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.

Now what’s his point? His point is, **“If a man has the gift of prophesying let him step up and do it. That is, if a man has the gift of prophesy let him step up and let it rip.”** Isn’t that his point? Let him use his gift.

Look at verse seven.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:7**...If it is serving, let him serve;

And we could make a direct application to the deacons here. Brothers if you are a deacon, if you are called to the ministry of service, get after it. Find out what needs to be done and do it. That way the body of Christ will cease to be

conformed to this present evil age and be transformed through the renewing of its mind as we work them out and exercise our gifts.

And in the rest of the section he continues with his list.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:7**...if it is teaching, let him teach; ⁸ if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently;

Elders are to work hard at how they govern. Dads are to work hard at how they rule their households. Mothers are to work hard at how they rule their children. Children are to work hard at how they rule their dogs.

Exercise the gift that you've been given because if you don't the body of Christ just sort of limps along unable to accomplish what it's supposed to accomplish. Isn't that his point? Then his last illustration is so simple.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:8**...if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

If you are going to show mercy do it with a smile, with a song in your heart. Don't make the person you are showing mercy to sadder than they were before you got there.

Now when I think about that and the many kindnesses you have shown my family in the last few weeks I just have to tell you it's a wonderful thing. It makes me be a better man. It gives me more insight into the Scripture. It makes me long to fulfill my role in the body of Christ. That's the point.

You know...I have a gift. You've got a gift. You just have to use it. We've got to not think so stinking much of ourselves and put our focus on our role in the body of Christ and fulfill that role so the Kingdom of Christ will be advanced. That's Paul's message plain and simple.

Get your mind right. Don't be puffed up. Think sober-mindedly. Use your gift because when we think of ourselves rightly we begin to see how we fit within the community, not puffed up but humbly living out our faith to the betterment of the body of Christ.

Let's pray.

¹ This idea is borrowed from a reflection on Romans 12 by Stuart Briscoe.

² Charles Swindoll, "Monuments" from *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1983), 317.

³ Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Romans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 200.